



Apaches Over Arizona

Story by Steve Harding

APACHES are gathering in Arizona, and this time their warpaint is olive drab.

The Apaches — AH-64A attack helicopters of the Western Army National Guard Aviation Training Site, or WAATS — are part of an innovative program that will ultimately train all AH-64A aviators for both the active Army and National Guard.

Located at Silverbell Army Heliport in Marana, about 30 miles northwest of Tucson, WAATS is uniquely qualified to provide the Apache training, said its commander, COL Pamela J. Rodriguez.

“This facility has been providing specialized helicopter training since October 1986,” she said. “Pilots, crewmembers and maintainers of such aircraft as the AH-1 Cobra attack helicopter and OH-58

Kiowa scout aircraft have benefited from WAATS’ unique blend of facilities and capabilities, and we’re set up specifically to provide quality training in both flight and support operations.”



AH-64A Apache attack helicopters like this one are becoming a familiar sight in Arizona skies as WAATS begins to take over all A-model training.

Organized for Success

WAATS is organized as a brigade, with a headquarters and three subordinate battalions, said CSM Kevin K. Herzinger.

The three companies of the TASS (The Army School System) Battalion handle AH-64 and OH-58 flight and maintenance training for both officers and enlisted soldiers; the Avn. Maintenance Bn. maintains and repairs WAATS' inventory of AH-64s, OH-58s and UH-60 Black Hawks; and the Support Bn. is responsible for both the everyday operations of WAATS' facilities and, through its Co. B, the operation of the facility's flight simulators, Herzinger said. The Sprt. Bn. also includes WAATS' medical, air-traffic control, crash and fire-rescue, and range-operations platoons.

Also resident at Silverbell is the 1st Bn., 285th Aviation Regiment, the first National Guard unit to be equipped with AH-64D Apaches, Herzinger said.

Among WAATS' most important attributes is the facility's proximity to some of the nation's best aviation



Located some 30 miles northwest of Tucson, Silverbell Army Airfield is home to AH-64A and AH-64D Apaches, UH-60 Black Hawks and OH-58 Kiowas.

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training areas, said LTC Anthony LaMorgese, commander of the maintenance battalion.

"We've got a 160-by-120-nautical-mile tactical training area that allows aircrews to do anything from nap-of-the-earth flight all the way to test flights at altitude," LaMorgese said. "And WAATS is within easy flying distance of even larger joint-service training and gunnery ranges in Arizona and California."

Arizona's weather is another plus, LaMorgese said, because the clear skies and sun allow an average of 360 training days a year.

"Another thing our students get is training in an environment very much like what they'll probably end up fighting in," said SFC Sam Vosburg, WAATS' instructor for aviation operations. "Here they learn to deal with the desert and the dust, and they find out how their systems really work in the types of places they'll probably operate in."

Helping students to learn how their aircraft will perform under different conditions is also where WAATS' AH-1 flight-weapons simulator and more advanced AH-64A combat-mission simulator come in. Each full-motion system allows students to "fly" a wide variety of missions under various conditions, without the costs or dangers of actual flight.

Among WAATS' most valuable attributes is its proximity to extensive aviation training areas and gunnery ranges.



The Boeing Co.



“Foreign military members use the AH-1 FWS quite a lot, and the AH-64A CMS supports both the training here at WAATS and National Guard and active-duty units in the region,” said LTC Frank Millerd, commander of WAATS’ Sprt. Bn.

Overall, Millerd said, the CMS racks up between 4,000 and 5,000 training hours each year. Those numbers will only increase, given the continuing expansion of Apache training at WAATS, he said. The facility is scheduled to receive a second Apache CMS in June, and will field an Aviation Combined Arms Tactical Trainer system in December 2004.

But the real secret to the quality of WAATS training, said Apache instructor pilot CPT Kevin Gaver, is the cumulative experience level of the training staff.

“I think our biggest advantage here at WAATS, in terms of what we offer our students, is a wealth of human experience,” Gaver said. “For ex-

(Above) WAATS’ full-motion AH-64A combat mission simulator, similar to this one, supports both “in-house” initial AH-64A training and refresher courses for National Guard and active-duty units in the region.

(Right) The CMS allows AH-64A aviators to hone their skills by “flying” a variety of challenging missions without the costs or dangers of actual flight.



U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command (both)



ample, our instructor pilots have an average of 3,250 flight hours, and many have extensive combat experience. The soldiers who instruct in the maintenance and aviation-operations courses are just as knowledgeable in their fields, and when you bring that much experience to the classroom or the cockpit it's a tremendous benefit for the students."

Apache Mecca

While WAATS will continue to offer training in the OH-58A and OH-58C — everything from aircraft qualification and instructor-pilot courses to the special skills required for counterdrug operations — the Apache program is undoubtedly drawing the most attention, Rodriguez said.

"We're certainly in the spotlight right now, and that's understandable,"

she said. "We're in the process of taking over a range of training that up to now has been the sole responsibility of the U.S. Army Aviation Center and School at Fort Rucker."

But Rodriguez stressed that WAATS is not out to make the Alabama-based Aviation Center obsolete.

"We're not trying to replace Fort Rucker. We're here to help train aviation soldiers so the Army can meet its readiness goals," she said.

Helping to meet those goals will be a graduated process, with WAATS first taking over the AH-64A aircraft qualification course, or AQC, which introduces already-qualified pilots of other helicopter types to the Apache.

"The first four AQC students arrived at WAATS in January," LaMorgese said. "We plan to offer two more classes this year, in April and July, with six students in each, and our

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goal is to ultimately have eight students in each class. We expect to graduate 40 AH-64 pilots during our second full year of Apache training and plan to double that number the following year."

Eventually, he said, WAATS will also be training AH-64A instructor pilots and maintenance test pilots, as well as offering a resident course for



Steve Harding (both)

(Above) Students in WAATS' various Apache courses also receive extensive classroom instruction.

(Left) Keeping the aircraft flying is up to the soldiers of WAATS' Maintenance Bn. Here, three members of the unit boresight an Apache's 30mm cannon.

the Apache aeroscout mission.

And to give things an international flavor, WAATS will continue to support the training of Republic of Singapore Air Force AH-64D pilots under the Peace Vanguard program. The Singapore pilots are going through a modified version of the D-model Apache training offered to Army pilots by the active-duty 21st Cavalry Regt. at Fort Hood, Texas.

WAATS will continue to be equally as busy in terms of training enlisted soldiers, Vosburg said. The facility already offers the aviation portion of the basic and advanced noncommissioned officers courses for the MOS 67 career field, as well as the MOS 67R Apache repairer course.

"In 2003 we'll actually conduct more AH-64 transition courses for enlisted repairers than Fort Eustis will," he said. "And by 2005 we'll be

doing all of the Army's A-model mechanic transition courses."

One of WAATS' most significant contributions to Army aviation training has been its development of CD-ROM-based training courses in several key fields, Vosburg said.

"The traditional Guard soldier can usually only get away from his unit for two weeks at a time to attend a particular Army school," he said. "And all the time he may spend away from the unit over the course of months or years to complete the school doesn't help maintain the unit readiness that the National Guard focuses on.

"So here at WAATS we've been developing interactive media instruction, or IMI, for delivery on CD-ROM," Vosburg said. "Soldiers can study the course materials on their own, which means they are better prepared for the school and take less time to complete a given course. The Aviation Operations Course is scheduled for IMI validation this year, and we're looking at other courses for possible IMI conversion."

A Busy Place

WAATS' involvement in several

key programs means that its members are keeping busy.

"Our OPTEMPO is higher than that of a traditional Guard unit," said SSG Mark Head, the Sprt. Bn.'s air-traffic control facility chief for WAATS' Picacho Stage Field.

One of the best indicators of that high OPTEMPO, he said, is the daily number of aircraft movements logged at Silver Bell and Picacho, which is used by pilots practicing emergency-procedures training and other maneuvers that would not be appropriate at the main heliport.

"On an average day, the three air-traffic controllers in our Support Bn. might handle 300 to 500 aircraft movements," Head said.

"Yes, we're certainly keeping busy," Rodriguez said, "in the classrooms, on the ramp and in the air. And the OPTEMPO will only increase as we expand the training we do here.

"But here at WAATS we have the talent — both in terms of officers and enlisted soldiers — to make this program succeed," she said. "And we are absolutely dedicated to providing the best possible training for the personnel and units that come here." □

